



PRESENTS...

Standard Manuscript Formatting for Short Fiction

by R. Michael Burns

One of the hard realities of the writing world is this: most editors are looking for reasons to reject your work. It's not that they're mean -- not all of them. It's simply that they get dozens, often hundreds of manuscripts landing on their desks on a regular basis, and if they can reject a submission without looking past the first page, that's one less they have to spend valuable time actually reading. And one of the easiest ways to get your work rejected at a glance is to submit a manuscript that clearly looks unprofessional.

While many editors and agents have specific formatting guidelines, some of which differ *significantly* from what follows, the guidelines below will generally suffice to give your fiction submission that vital professional look.

Of course, you should *always* check the specific guidelines of any market to which you intend to submit. Always. That's because for every editor who will look for exactly what follows, there will be another who wants something slightly different, and another who wants something *completely* different.

That said, inasmuch as there *is* an industry standard for manuscript formats, what follows is (pretty much) it.

First Page:

Your Name

Approximate Word Count [1]

Your Address

Your Phone Number

Your e-mail Address

Your Title [2]

Your Byline

Your story begins here. It should be double-spaced and typed in a 12-point font. Many editors prefer Courier New (this font), but many will accept Times New Roman, which has the virtue of taking up substantially less space on the page. Avoid other **font types** or *sizes*. If you have content that you want put in a special font, make a handwritten note about it. (In truth, your best bet is to negotiate this after you make the sale.)

Use one inch margins. The left-hand margin should be justified (that is, straight all the way down), the right should be ragged. On MS Word, use the "align left" button, not the "justify" button.

Paragraphs should be indented 1/2 inch, and should not have extra spaces between them. Extra spaces imply space breaks, which show transitions between times, places, points-of-view, and so on. Where space breaks are required, it's a good idea to place three centered asterisks in the space:

* * *

This way, if the work gets reformatted and the space break winds up at the end of a page, it will still be obvious.

(This is a tricky one, though -- some editors prefer pound signs, or a single asterisk, or something else entirely.

Again, read their guidelines carefully.)

Where you would typically use italics, use underlining instead. Underlining stands out more than italics and is therefore less likely to be missed by copy editors or the scanners some editors use to put your manuscript on their computers. (Some editors are, understandably, reluctant to

accept electronic copies of stories because of the concern of viruses, though electronic submissions are becoming more and more common.)

Avoid using **bold face** or emphasizing words by putting them in ALL CAPS.

Use "straight quotes" rather than "smart quotes" (quotation marks that automatically bend toward the quoted words). Not all software supports smart quotes, which sometimes come out instead as random gibberish. The same goes for "smart apostrophes" and for the automatic ellipsis inserted by programs like MS Word. For ellipsis, use periods with spaces between them. (Technically, ellipsis at the end of a sentence should also include some type of terminal punctuation, such as a final period (. . . .) or a question mark (. . . ?) However, it appears to be increasingly acceptable to use ellipsis as a terminal punctuation by themselves. Different publishers have their own standards here, and will probably change your format (as needed) to conform to their styles. Whether or not to use two spaces after terminal punctuation is another contentious issue. Although it's what most typing classes teach, many publishers are eliminating the extra spaces. Doing so can shorten a full-length novel by a substantial

number of pages, thereby making each copy of the book somewhat cheaper. As with ellipsis, this is something publishers will usually fix on their own if they decide to buy your work.)

If you're using a Courier font, use two hyphens (--) for an M-dash. Actual M-dashes are very hard to distinguish from regular hyphens in this font.

Page numbers should start on page two and appear in the header at right, along with your name and the story's title, like this:

Name, "Title" p. #

This way, if the pages get separated, they can be reunited. Moving the header to the right also makes it less obtrusive -- the first thing the reader sees at the top left-hand side of the page is the next line of text, not the header. (The story's title should appear in quotation marks in the header, but not on the first page. See note [2] below.)

Submission manuscripts should always be single-sided only.

When you reach the end, a simple

-- The End --

suffices to wrap it all up.

Notes on the first page:

[1] In general, round the word count on short stories to the nearest 100 words. Some markets, however, will want an exact word count. Occasionally, editors will also ask that you include the submission's genre on the first page, but usually this information, if needed, should appear in your cover letter.

In any case, do not include a statement like "Selling first North American Serial Rights only." Most markets will make it very clear what rights they intend to buy and, unless you are already well-established, this is probably nonnegotiable. Be sure you know before you submit what rights the market buys. If you don't want to sell certain rights (such as reprint rights or electronic rights), submit to a different market.

[2] Don't put your title in quotation marks, bold face, underlining, italics, or a large or different font.

Centering it above your byline is enough to show that it is the title. Anything else will immediately mark you as a beginner.

These are the basics, and should serve you reasonably well. That said, remember the First Rule: *Always* read the guidelines of the market, editor or agent you intend to send your submission to. Beyond simply wanting professional-looking manuscripts, editors and agents also want to know that you have taken the time to research your markets and that you take their requirements seriously.

Remember, if your work looks unprofessional, it is likely to be treated as unprofessional. Submit a properly formatted manuscript and your brilliant prose, sharply defined characters, and ingenious plots can shine through.